

The Role of Staff Support on Student Engagement

OnTrack Greenville Evaluation CIS Case Study
Brief Report I.
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Introduction and Methods

Some people believe that students who are more involved in their school – through sports, theater, clubs, or a special interest in particular courses or subjects – have better academic outcomes, but is this really the case? If so, how can school staff and school programs increase student engagement? This brief will explore those questions, and will examine how student support, like the support provided by Communities in Schools (CIS) site coordinators and talented school staff and educators, may influence student engagement.



Communities in Schools is a core program of the OnTrack Greenville Initiative, designed to connect students to caring adults and relevant community resources with the goal of keeping students engaged in school and headed for graduation. To better understand the impact CIS can have on individual students and understand the mechanisms at work when CIS is effective, the OnTrack Greenville Evaluation Team designed a small student case study. The case study was designed to obtain a holistic view of a few students' academic experiences and the ways these experiences are influenced by CIS support.

In Spring of 2024, seven students who were enrolled in CIS sat down for one-on-one conversations with an HSRI evaluator. Researchers asked questions about the student's background, school experiences, and reflections on CIS. At the end of the conversation, students were asked for the name of any teachers or school staff who knew them well and might have additional insights on their school experiences.

Using the student recommendations, researchers interviewed the assigned CIS staff and the relevant teacher(s) or support staff. In total, 17 interviews were conducted, transcribed and analyzed. The evaluation team used a flexible analysis approach which integrated content analysis (reading to identify the answers to pre-set questions) and inductive coding (documenting patterns of topics or perspectives that arose in the interviews).

Introduction and Methods

One prominent theme that arose during the team’s analysis was changes in the quality of students’ engagement in their school life. Students, teachers, and staff alike described expanded interest in school classes, increased student belief that school could be valuable to them and expanded involvement in school-based extracurricular activities.

This brief will first examine insights from the field of student engagement, striving to summarize the current understanding of what engagement is, how it impacts students’ success, and how it may be built or encouraged. Throughout this summation, data from case studies will be woven in to illustrate these principles. Specifically, using quotations and examples from interviews, the brief will describe these students’ changes in involvement and engagement with school. Additionally, these data will highlight how student support from caring adults may have contributed to those changes.

Finally, the brief will spotlight a single student’s experience. This CIS student’s middle and high school career will provide a lens for exploring the interplay between each of the components examined in the brief – student support, student efficacy, engagement in school, and academic outcomes.

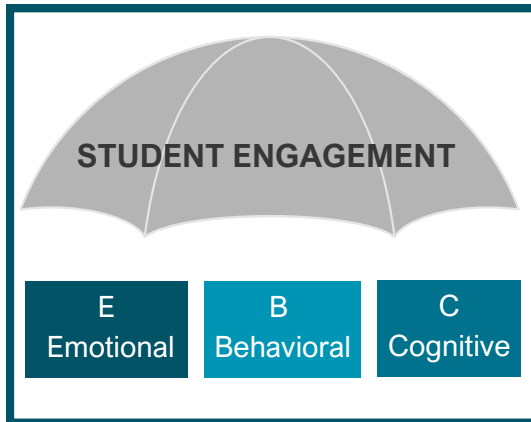
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And [CIS staff] was there to help us, help me and my mom. And I’m grateful for that, because without him, I probably either would have kept doing the same things I was doing back then or something even worse.

— student 7

Engagement in Learning

Student engagement is a broad idea, but one way it has frequently been conceptualized in research is as a construct composed of three components. The first component, behavioral engagement, asks ‘does the student participate in school-based activities and do they follow the expectations of the school?’.



Emotional (or affective) engagement refers to students’ feelings and emotions related to teachers, peers, classes and other school-related activities. The third component, cognitive engagement, includes students’ internal perspectives on learning, self-regulation, and personal educational goals.[1] Student engagement is important because it is a strong predictor of students’ academic outcomes. In other words, when other student context and characteristics are held constant, students with greater school engagement have better academic outcomes.[2]

In case study interviews with students, CIS staff, and other school personnel, there was extensive evidence that in the time they were involved with CIS, this set of students increased their involvement in school-based activities, showing a change in their behavioral engagement with school. Students also described experiencing shifts in the way they view school, classwork, or the value of education, evidencing changes in both the cognitive and emotional (affective) domains of student engagement as well. [See Box #1 for examples of shifts in engagement described in the case study data].

For many of the students involved in the case study, increased engagement often accompanied signs of improved academic performance. Interviews seemed to hint at a connection between improved student engagement and better educational outcomes. As previously noted, this connection is supported by research on student motivation and engagement in school. Studies have found that student engagement is a good predictor of academic success.[2]

ENGAGEMENT CHANGES: Examples from Interviews

1

- E Enjoyment of school, classes, peers & staff
- E Team camaraderie
- B Student use of strategies for self-regulation
- B Participation in sports teams, clubs, and student leadership
- B Participation in school-linked volunteering
- C Verbally linking high school success to future goals
- C Intellectual curiosity in school subject areas
- C Student-driven pursuit of learning on subject of interest

Engagement in Learning

The logical question that arises is: how can student engagement be encouraged, and why did the students included in the case study increase their overall engagement with school? In their 2012 article on academic motivation, self-concept, engagement, and performance, Green, et al. explored two predictors of student engagement. The two predictors they examined were social support, which can encompass peer, school staff, and parental support, and student self-efficacy, which refers to student's sense of their own ability to accomplish the steps required to reach their academic goals.[3]

Patterns in these interviews seem to dovetail with research findings, specifically the finding that supportive staff relationships and increased self-efficacy (educational self-belief) are precursors of increased student engagement. In other words, in cases where students experienced changes in their school engagement, students often also spoke about the power of having a staff person, primarily a CIS site coordinator, notice them and form an ongoing supportive relationship. [see Box #2 for quotations from students on the supportive staff relationship they've experienced].

SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS: Quotations from Student Interviews

2

STUDENT 8: "If I didn't have [CIS staff] in middle school year I don't know where I would be at now. Honestly, I was doing bad, home was bad. He helped me."

STUDENT 1: "Anytime that she saw that my tardies were starting to increase, or my grades are starting to drop below, [CIS staff] would come to me or pull me out of class and come to me during lunch, and just ask me what was up, what I needed."

STUDENT 6: "But [CIS staff] he doesn't just show empathy, but he also, just like genuinely shows that he cares. It's not just words being said, but he actually shows action towards his words."

Several students shared that their relationships with staff were foundational in getting them more deeply involved at school, and shared tangible steps that CIS, or other school staff, took to link them to school activities or cultivate their school-related interests. Among other examples, students described a trusted staff in their life doing the following: helping them tryout for a sports team, providing support with setting up a new club, researching careers in their field of interest, and advocating with parents to keep students in school activities when balancing school activities, family responsibilities, and academics became a challenge.

Engagement in Learning

The second precursor for student engagement discussed in the literature is self-efficacy, which was another common theme of the interviews [see Box #3 for examples of students discussing their increased confidence in themselves and their abilities]. Sometimes students discussed their increased self-belief in isolation, but often students said that their growth was the result, or partially the result, of the support of a trusted adult at school. In one interview, a student laid out not only the connection between the support she received and her increased self-belief, but also how that self-belief led to her increased engagement:

“

[CIS staff] taking time out of her day just to listen to me, sit with me, you know, connect with me. It really made a difference. It makes a big difference to be noticed, and through that I've really felt more comfortable growing into myself. I felt more comfortable trying out for the team and running for student government and participating in school events.

This student explicitly said that the support she received from a trusted staff member led to increased self-belief, which empowered her to take concrete steps to follow her educational interests and increase her involvement in school. Other case study students did not lay out the pathway they took that led towards greater engagement so concretely, but their cases display the clear connections and interplay between all the three elements: student support from CIS staff or other caring school personnel, changes in self-efficacy, and deepened engagement in school. It's clear that many of the students who participated in these case studies credit CIS staff (and sometimes other school personnel) with contributing to their scholastic self-confidence and promoting their involvement in the school community.

SELF EFFICACY CHANGES: Quotations from Student Interviews

3

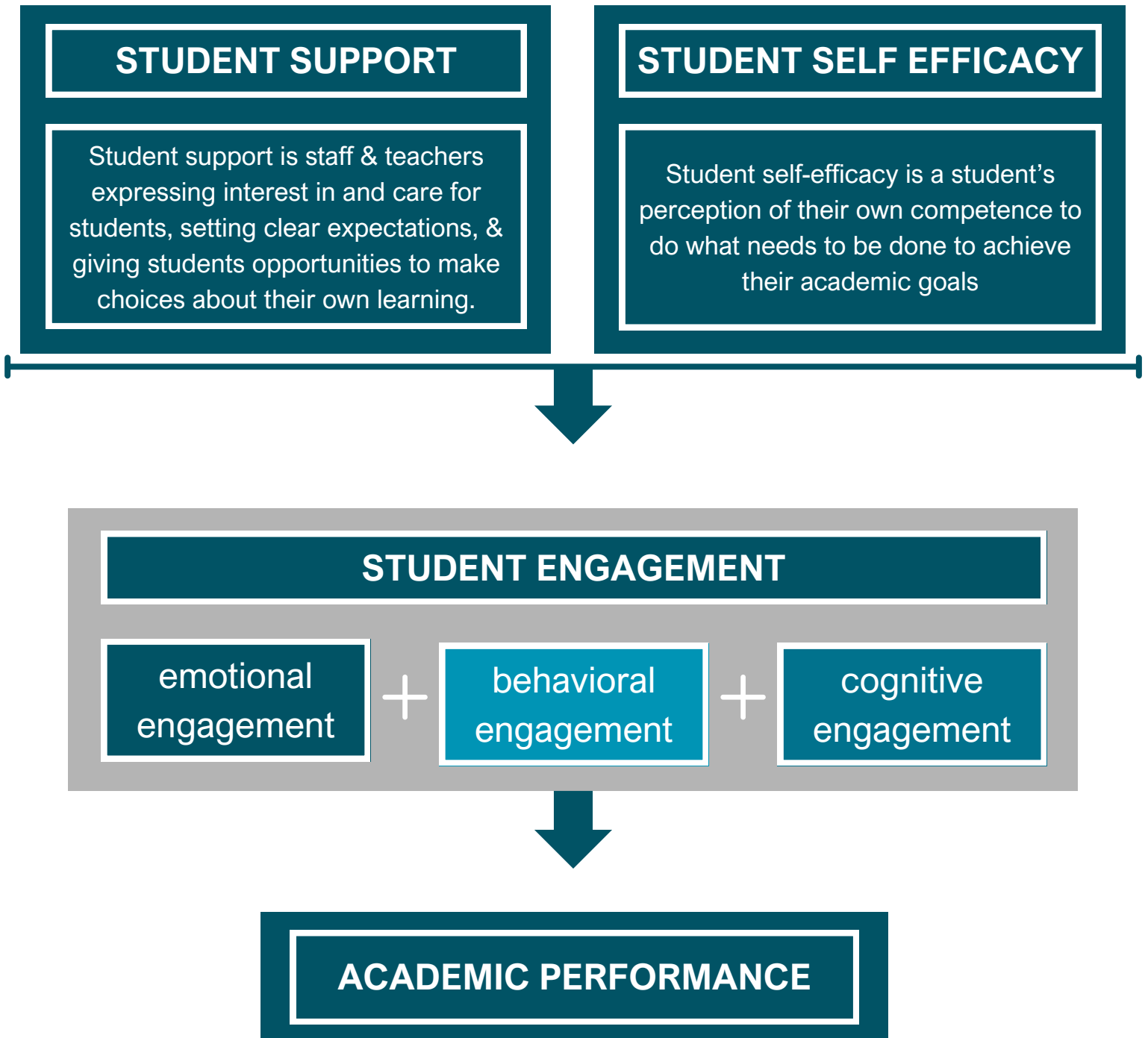
STUDENT 4: "I know that I'm smarter, in a sense, and that colleges are looking at me."

STUDENT 2: "I was leading a group and everything, I didn't even know I could do that because, honestly, I used to be a bad student."

STUDENT 7: "My confidence has gone up, I'm more confident in myself. I'm more, I'm able to raise my hand and if I get the wrong answer, I said, Okay, I learned from it."

Engagement in Learning

The following graphic illustrates the relationships between social support, student self-efficacy, student engagement and academic performance.



Student Experience

Student 7

As a way of deepening our understanding of how supportive care from CIS staff and other school staff may influence student personal and academic experiences, this section examines a single student's experience. Utilizing the staff and student's own words, the following diagram presents the student's context and concerns, the interventions/supports offered through CIS or other school staff, and the ensuing outcomes. Following the diagram, is a narrative look at the student's experience.

CONTEXT

Student 7's family has financial challenges and historical family trauma. The family experienced a major disruption just before student 7 began high school, and COVID caused further family challenges. Taken together, these factors had a major negative effect on the student's self-image and mental health.

CONCERNS

"Back then, I used to hurt myself. I had cuts on my hands and my body. Because my depression was so bad to the point I had suicidal tendencies...cause back then I thought no one cared." (student 7)

Mental Health & Self Harm

"I was going through stuff, and I was skipping school. I missed like 40 days my first semester... and I was failing all my classes before [CIS staff] came in." (student 7)

Academic & Attendance Issues

"In the past, student 7 was a person who used to easily give up. If the assignment was a little bit more challenging or it was too much work, he used to easily give up." (teacher re student 7)

Low Academic Grit

"So I see my mom struggle. I also see my mom cry because she stresses over payments and stresses over what we're going to eat and all that." (student 7)

Family Financial Stress

Student 7

INTERVENTIONS

“I thought maybe it was that he didn’t have a goal to look forward to. After we started going deep into the subject, and we did more hands on work, he got really interested in it. He started thinking of pursuing the subject in college or taking his career towards the field.” (teacher re student 7)

Cultivating
Student
Interests

“[CIS staff] was the person that convinced me to join the soccer team just for me to get my mind off of everything. So I joined the soccer team as goalkeeper and about three games into the season, I got bumped up to varsity.” (student 7)

Cultivating
Student
Interests

“We started this last year, but now every day after school we meet for like five or 10 minutes. That’s the usual routine that we follow.”
(teacher re student 7)

Teacher/
Staff Social
Support

“[CIS staff] helped my mom pay for bills and stuff, and helped us get good food when we didn’t have food. For that I’m grateful and it was a weight off my mom when it was a burden she couldn’t deal with and it helped reduce her stress.” (student 7)

Tangible
Assistance

“[CIS staff] pulled me aside. He talked to me. He didn’t sugarcoat it. He showed me that he cared. He’s one of the first people that, back then, actively listened to my problems and helped me through my own stuff and helped me through what I was going through at the time.” (student 7)

Teacher/
Staff Social
Support

Student 7

INTERVENTIONS

“Honestly, no one introduced me to [CIS staff]. Matter of fact, he was the one that pulled me aside. At first I thought he was going to be...someone who wanted to do medications and all that, but no, he pulled me aside and he talked to me. He actually talked to me and he kept pulling me aside to talk to me.” (student 7)

Teacher/
Staff Social
Support

OUTCOMES

Cause in the past I didn't want to go to school. I didn't feel like it was important. But I discovered and he taught me that I have to go to school to do the job I wanted to do. And he helped me change my way of thinking of school. (student 7)

Future Goals
& Academic
Motivation

“If I get the right answer, then I get it right. But back then I used to not even speak in class, not even speak to my peers, no one. But now I do talk to my classmates and everyone and my self-esteem has gone up. Everything, everything has been improving. My confidence, my view of myself especially.” (student 7)

Confidence
& Self
Perception

“Yeah, with attendance, most days student 7 drops his bag in my classroom and then picks up that bag in the evening. So, if he misses a day, he knows he is answerable to me. I think if there is an adult in the building to check on them and who really cares for them, that makes a huge difference with attendance.” (teacher re student 7)

Better
Attendance

Student 7's Story

Student 7's high school journey began during the COVID-19 pandemic and was marked by significant challenges both at home and school. Ongoing financial strain has caused stress for the family. Additionally, during this period, one of the adults who lived in the home departed, leaving student 7 with the sense that they had not authentically cared about his family. With this backdrop, student 7's first year in high school was particularly tough, characterized by frequent absences, depression, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts.



The turning point came when the CIS site coordinator at his school noticed that he was struggling and reached out. This coordinator listened carefully, provided honest guidance and practical support, and was consistently committed, which showed student 7 that the staff truly cared about him and that he mattered.

One of the site coordinator's key interventions was encouraging student 7 to join a sports team at the school. After joining, student 7 quickly moved up to a higher-level team. This achievement boosted his confidence and gave him a sense of belonging with teammates and more broadly at school. As his involvement in sports built his confidence, his engagement in school academics increased.

One teacher noticed his interest in her subject and spoke with him about the ways that his strengths aligned with the skills needed in related professions. The teacher noted in her interview that when she first met the student, he was afraid to speak up or make mistakes, and but since then, she has seen his confidence blossom, and with it has come a greater willingness to ask questions, be curious, and engage in her class.

The teacher and the site coordinator encouraged him to explore related college and job prospects. With the support of his mother, CIS staff, and his teacher, student 7's interest in the subject has continued to grow, and has shaped his career aspirations, even influencing his decision to attend college starting this fall.

Student Outcomes

- Dramatic (self-reported) improvement in school attendance, from approximately 40 absences in freshman year to less than 10 in senior year.
- Increased academic performance and engagement in class.
- New leadership skills in sports and the classroom.
- Increased self-esteem and confidence, empowering greater participation in the classroom and school life.
- Improved academic perseverance. The student and his teacher both noted that his willingness to keep going when a task is difficult, and to be undeterred by mistakes, has grown.
- Student-led creation of clear and concrete goals for his future.
- High school graduation and enrollment in university.

In student 7's case, the support of staff, engagement in school, and self-belief appeared to reinforce and strengthen one another. Once the student felt that someone genuinely cared for him, he felt that he could take the leap to join a sport. As his confidence in the sport and with his teammates grew, it fed into engagement in the classroom. Encouragement and support from trusted adults encouraged hands-on involvement in the course, which further deepened the student's interest in school and entrenched his career goals, empowering him to apply to, and matriculate in, college. This virtuous interplay between student support, self-belief, involvement at school, and academic success was observed across the interviews with case study participants.

Acknowledgements

We feel immense gratitude to the students who trusted us with their stories and took time out of their days to support the success of those who will come after them. We also so appreciate the instructors, CIS staff, and school support personnel who participated in interviews and assisted with scheduling and organizing student conversations. We are grateful for your time and efforts in support of this case study, and even more grateful for the time, dedication, and energy you give to your students.

This brief has been reviewed and approved by the student whose story is discussed.

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